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# How Good Is the CIA?

Central Intelligence and National Security. *Reviewed by Joseph Kraft*  
By Harry Howe Ransom.  
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Contributor "Saturday Evening Post,"  
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THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY employs about 10,000 people and has an annual budget of several hundred million dollars. It participates in the decisions of its parent body, the National Security Council, undertakes far-flung espionage operations and sits as coordinating queen over an intelligence community embracing major units of a dozen different departments and agencies including State, Defense, the Atomic Energy Commission and FBI. Obviously, the CIA is important. Is it any good?

Guide lines are necessarily few. No newspaper or wire service even attempts coverage of the CIA. Complaining constituents are alien to the Agency. Half-a-dozen independent commissions, including Herbert Hoover's, have surveyed the Agency, but their public reports, at least, have been highly generalized. Senator Mike Mansfield notwithstanding, no Congressional committee sits "watchdog on the watchman." Only five or six Senators have any exact knowledge of the CIA budget, and these, especially, are prepared, as Senator Richard Russell once said, to take the Agency "on faith." A genuine need, therefore, is filled by Harry Ransom's admirably balanced "descriptive analysis of the intelligence community."

What Ransom chiefly has to describe is progress. Before World War II, intelligence came mainly, as General George Marshall put it, from what attachés picked up "over the

coffee cups," and, fittingly perhaps, most of it was stowed away at low levels. Week-old warnings about Pearl Harbor reached responsible officials only hours before the attack.

Set against that background, centralization itself was a large step forward. All information now flows to an office with immediate access to the President. Harry Truman, in fact, used to begin his working day with a CIA briefing. Under the Eisenhower regime, a CIA briefing opens the weekly National Security Council meeting.

Even after centralization, some weaknesses of evaluation have subsisted. The Korean invasion caught the United States napping though various intelligence offices harbored chunks of undigested information pointing toward the assault. Subsequently, General Walter Bedell Smith, whose advent at the Agency inaugurated also an improvement in high-level personnel, established the system of "National Estimates," a pooled evaluation of all available material on a troubled area. Allen Dulles, who has directed the Agency since 1953, has gotten consistently high marks all around. Ransom, running the risk of being taken for a blasphemer in some quarters, likens him to General Marshall.

Spectacular misses of course mar the record of progress. Apart from Korea, CIA had its trousers around ankle level when the Chinese Communists crossed the Yalu, and they

were just above the knees at the time of Suez. Yet how much can possibly be known of ventures which by their very nature are wrapped in secrecy? If Nuri es-Said, sitting in Baghdad at the head of a formidable police network, was in the dark about the coup which unseated him, how should Dulles have anticipated it?

Far more serious, however, was the faulty estimation of the implications of the coup, which led to the U.S. landings in Beirut last summer. Ransom finds an essential weakness of the present system in its failure to draw meaningful patterns from basic research. "The whole intelligence enterprise," he writes, "tends to define knowledge as the orderly accumulation of facts or the stringing together of endless footnotes. . . . Too little attention is given the purposeful accumulation of data which can support a broader theoretical approach to foreign policy problems."

Centralization, despite progress, has not been fully accomplished, and this area of weakness comes under special fire. But Ransom is optimistic in the long run. He seems to have no doubt that unification of the entire defense system is on the way. "When these changes are made, probably some years hence, they will have profound effect upon the national intelligence function."

An important point, however, Ransom seems to miss—public opinion. Aside from dismissing cloak-and-dagger operations as "Hollywood," and inferentially lamenting a disposition to see the seeds of a Gestapo in intelligence operations, Ransom pays little heed to the ordinary citizen. Yet the root cause of official unreceptivity to intelligence reports is the enormous gap between what specialists know and what we imagine. No one is suggesting that the CIA offer weekly briefings to the wire services. Still, most of us, without some kind of prodding, cling to our ignorance. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was only speaking the popular mind when, apprised of Pearl Harbor, he said, "My God, this can't be true."

